

VZCZCXRO1643
RR RUEHFL RUEHNP
DE RUEHMIL #0173/01 2250904
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 130904Z AUG 09 ZDK
FM AMCONSUL MILAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1828
INFO RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME 8892
RUEHFL/AMCONSUL FLORENCE 0218
RUEHNP/AMCONSUL NAPLES 0213
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MILAN 000173

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/12/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [IT](#)
SUBJECT: ITALY'S LEGA NORD EYES BIG REGIONAL PRIZES

REF: A. ROME 877
[1](#)B. MILAN 95

Classified By: CG Carol Perez for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: With the Northern League's (LN) successful showing in recent local elections, attention is now turning to bigger prizes: regional governorships coming vacant in March 2010. With Veneto apparently in the bag, party leaders are now looking for at least one other scalp -- either Lombardy or Piedmont. Though neither seem easy LN victories, they could be up for contention. As the League's national profile increases, it's important to keep in mind that the party's local and populist roots are more central to its growing popularity than its increasingly xenophobic ideological bent. For now, the party will be satisfied with playing a locally powerful/national spoiler role. However, with leader and icon Umberto Bossi ailing, the party's future direction will depend more on the personalities of the next generation of "Leghisti" -- a topic we will look at septel. End summary.

LANDSLIDE FOR CENTER-RIGHT

[1](#)2. (SBU) In local elections that took place in June, the center-right coalition (comprised of the People of Liberty (PdL) party and the Northern League (LN) party) scored impressive victories in the provinces and cities of Northern Italy. Within this coalition, the performance of LN is especially significant since it has traditionally been by far the weaker partner. Though in June this trend remained true in most of the country, in Veneto LN had a breakthrough, coming in only 0.9% behind PdL. The League also secured eight provincial presidencies in the north. Overall, the center-right won a decisive majority: of the 23 provincial elections, the center-right won 19. This is a substantial shift from the previous elections in 2004 demonstrating that the political climate in Northern Italy is evolving, and the LN is expanding its appeal well beyond the "fringe."

[1](#)3. (C) Though the League has become a more important player in the center-right coalition, the party's real objective remains solidifying its local power base. The next big opportunity to do so will be the March 2010 regional elections. Both Umberto Bossi (the leader of LN) and Mario Borghezio (a Turin-based LN Parliamentarian and an important party leader) have said publicly that based on the June election results, LN expects to take three regional governorships -- Veneto, Lombardy, and Piedmont. With elections still eight months away, these declarations are a LN bargaining strategy to exact the best possible pre-election deal out of its PdL partners. However, they also reflect a growing sentiment within the League that it can contend with the PdL in dominating center-right politics in northern Italy.

[1](#)4. (C) In light of LN's strong performance across the north in June, Italian Minister for Legislative Simplification

Roberto Calderoli, a top Leghisti politician and strategist, said that his party would no longer accept PdL's ceding of the governorship of Veneto alone. The League feels it has Veneto locked up without any help from the PdL, a viewpoint that could increase friction within the LN-PdL ruling coalition. Nonetheless, the LN and Bossi have set their sights on the coveted governorship of the Lombardy region. The ailing Bossi began as part of the "Lega Lombarda" and so the governor's seat in Milan would be a symbolic win for him as he nears the end of his life. Though Bossi's personal attachment to Lombardy may miff the LN's Veneto voter base, the significance of grabbing the governorship of Lombardy would trump internal party squabbles.

LIKELY REGIONS TO BARGAIN FOR

15. (C) As mentioned, in the Veneto region LN has considerable strength as a stand-alone party. For example, in the small Veneto community of Oppeano, LN took 82% of the vote during the June polling. At this point, LN's negotiations with PdL in the run-up to March's gubernatorial elections would likely only be over the choice of LN candidate. Giancarlo Galan (the current regional governor and member of PdL) is blamed by his party for "losing" Veneto to LN in June and is considered a lame duck. Right now there are two likely LN candidates, and thus successors to Galan. The first is Luca Zaia the popular Minister of Agriculture (though contacts say he currently has no interest in running), and the other Flavio Tosi (the current mayor of Verona). Though Tosi (whose conviction for inciting racial hatred was upheld on appeal in July) is more divisive and a tougher sell for PdL and moderate members of LN, he has proven to be an efficient

MILAN 00000173 002 OF 002

administrator. He is clearly intent to be governor and is trying to burnish his image by fostering relations with the United States (making himself regularly available to meet with U.S. diplomats and publicizing our trips to the Verona area in the local media) and by bolstering his credentials as a moderate, respected, and influential local figure. Though outwardly and verbally tough on immigration, he also has stated publicly that immigrants who work are a necessary part of the economy. The outcome of the governor's race in Veneto is particularly important to U.S. interests as the region hosts the Vicenza army base.

16. (C) Lombardy is a sentimental target for LN but a strategic center for PdL. It is the nation's economic hub and the political and business base of PM Berlusconi. The incumbent regional governor, Roberto Formigoni, is PdL and has an approval rating of over 60%. However, an opening for a LN candidate is possible as Formigoni has aspirations to ascend to national political prominence and contacts tell us that his connections to "Communion and Liberation" (a celibate lay catholic organization) make the PdL brass nervous. There are strong LN candidates in Lombardy, but none as entrenched in local politics as Formigoni. Thus, absent an offer of a better job it is likely he will run again and win.

17. (C) Piedmont is a region usually associated with the Democratic Party (PD), so while both PdL and LN may pick up significant support the center-right is unlikely to take a majority in the region. From the center-right, PdL candidates would be stronger than those from LN. However, since there are only limited prospects for any meaningful center-right success, the PdL may offer the LN lead slots -- "consolation candidacies" -- in the elections. The offer of these slots could be seen as a "gift" from PdL to LN that would eventually require some reciprocation. While there are some possible LN candidates in Piedmont, the PD-dominated electorate is unlikely to be receptive.

COMMENT: WHAT WILL HAPPEN WHEN HE'S GONE?

18. (C) As the Northern League becomes increasingly

"mainstream" in the north, it's important to take stock of their goals and vision. The party's constituency and ambitions have not strayed significantly from the northern roots and identity that gave rise to the party. Certainly anti-immigration rhetoric, which is increasingly permeating much of Italy's center-right political groupings, finds its shrillest manifestation in the statements of LN leaders, including Bossi's. However, the LN remains first and foremost a populist party, rooted in the north and the region's thousands of small businesses, and committed to maximizing the control of local and regional politics by local people. While Bossi remains at the helm, we don't believe the LN will make a grab at becoming a broad national party, but will prefer to maintain its spoiler role in the north. A major "x-factor," however, is the health of the boss. As his health deteriorates, Bossi has been focusing on the short and sentimental game which, for him, means securing a regional presidency in Lombardy. But with the charismatic leader and old war horse failing, the question of who will replace Bossi is a major dilemma facing the party. We will look at some of the likely heirs septel.

PEREZ